

After WestRock paper mill workers in Alabama reject second contract, company enforces lockout

J. L'Heureau
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Almost 500 members of three United Steelworkers (USW) locals employed at WestRock’s Mahrt Mill paper mill in Cottonton, Alabama, were locked out on Thursday by the company after they rejected a contract for the second time on October 1. Workers at the mill rejected the first offer on September 21.

USW locals 971, 1471 and 1972 have been involved with negotiations with the company over a new contract after the last contract expired almost one year ago but have been working under extensions ever since. The deadline to accept the company’s “final offer” was on Thursday morning, after which the company locked out the workers.

Located east of Montgomery in Russell County, WestRock’s Mahrt Mill is one of hundreds of paper and packaging facilities operated by WestRock, a Fortune 500 transnational packaging corporation, which has an employee roster of 50,000 dispersed over five continents. Founded in 2015 after several mergers and headquartered in Atlanta, Georgia, it recorded over \$18.5 billion in revenue as of 2021, with a market value of \$12 billion as of March 2022. The “total compensation” of CEO David Sewell (formerly president of Sherwin-Williams) was \$21 million in 2021.

One of the main points of contention for the mill workers during the contract negotiations has been the company’s efforts to remove a “penalty” clause in the current deal that guarantees overtime pay. Workers at the mill report that shifts that can stretch up to 16 hours are not uncommon. Local 971 President Bobby

Watson, who is on the USW’s bargaining team, said that “[t]he company is wanting to relieve us of contract language that offers us protection for workers with understaffing and overtime,” adding that “[t]hey have offered to buy that language. Our union has said that language is not for sale.”

Spelling out the union’s prostration before management, Watson said, “All this language that they’re wanting to buy, or now force people to lose, is all under their control. They’re the master, they control the workforce, they hire and fire, so if you would properly staff your mills and your locations, this language wouldn’t be a problem.”

USW District 9 Director Daniel Flippo responded in a statement released Thursday on the union’s website that “WestRock must be made accountable for its decision to hold hostage our jobs, families and community over issues that should be resolved through collective bargaining.”

The Mahrt Mills workers’ rejection of the sellout deal brought to them by the union bureaucracy continues the wave of similar rejections. In early 2021 Amazon workers at the BHM1 plant in Bessemer, Alabama, rejected a unionization drive by the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU). This was closely followed by the rejection by Warrior Met coal miners in Brookwood, Alabama, of a sellout tentative agreement brought to them by the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) by 1,006 to 45. Since then, workers at Kroger, Volvo Trucks, Dana auto parts, John Deere, Kellogg’s, General Motors, Chevron and others have rejected wage-cutting deals brought to them—in some instances more than once—by their “representatives” in the respective unions.

With the current inflation rate in the US standing at over 8 percent, real average hourly wages of US workers have fallen by 2.8 percent over the last year. Bloomberg Law reported in August that real wages in the US South have declined twice as fast as in other regions of the country. In Alabama, the US Senate Joint Economic Committee has reported “a 13% price increase in basic goods since January 2021.” As of 2019, average household income in Alabama is just under \$52,000, according to the US Census American Community Survey, more than \$10,000 below the national average.

USW District 9 Director Flippo also stated that “[t]he essential, experienced union workforce that kept the mill running through the pandemic cannot be treated as expendable, and the USW will follow up with the National Labor Relations Board.” However, it was the USW that kept its members at Mahrt Mill and throughout the country on the job during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Mahrt Mill workers must recognize that their struggle as part of a rapidly escalating global strike wave that is intensifying as workers fight against the results of the criminal mishandling of the pandemic by capitalist governments all over the world which has permitted the unnecessary deaths of millions, disrupted supply chains and unleashed raging inflation.

The biggest obstacle facing workers in carrying out their struggle is the trade union apparatus. From the US to South Korea, Scotland to South Africa, the union bureaucracy is working overtime to isolate, wear down, disorient and betray its members. As a result real wages for unionized workers in the US grew less than those of non-union workers over the past year.

Mahrt Mill workers should establish their own democratically-run rank-and-file committee, independent of the USW, with members elected from the most trustworthy and militant workers, to carry their fight forward.

The lessons of the International Paper (IP) strike, which lasted from June 1987 to October 1988, is instructive in this regard. According to an academic study on that strike published in 2006, over one thousand IP workers in Mobile, Alabama, were locked out in March 1987, “precipitating the entire conflict between the two sides.”

That courageous struggle was guided into a dead end

by the United Paperworkers’ International Union (UPIU), which stood by as every worker that struck was permanently replaced by IP. The remnants of UPIU merged with the United Steelworkers of America (USWA) in 2005 to become the USW.

More recently, the USW sat by as IP shuttered its mills in Franklin, Virginia, in 2009 and in Courtland, Alabama, in 2014. WestRock recently closed its linerboard and pulp mill in Panama City, Florida, in June, which the USW also did little to oppose.

These actions on behalf of the companies are in line with bureaucracy’s close coordination with the Biden administration, agreeing to sellout deals with pay increases far below the rate of inflation to ensure no major disruptions in critical industries where the USW has members, such as oil refineries and naval defense industries.

While USW President Tom Conway promises that company contracts will not “add to inflationary pressures,” protecting in the process the bureaucrats’ \$1 billion in assets, the USW is doing everything in its power to keep members in the dark about Washington’s far-advanced war preparations vis-à-vis Russia and China that are spiraling towards a nuclear exchange. In acknowledging the role of the unions, Biden declared, “If I got to go to war, I’m going with you guys. I’ll tell you. I mean it.”

To win their fight Mahrt Mill workers should make the broadest appeal to their brothers and sisters at other paper mill factories, as well as Goodrich tire plant workers in Tuscaloosa, the Warrior Met miners, Amazon workers, teachers, and workers internationally such as the Essity paper mill workers in New Zealand that have faced a similar lockout by the company since August.



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